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ScienceDirect

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 197 (2015) 722 – 729

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

7th World Conference on Educational Sciences, (WCES-2015), 05-07 February 2015, Novotel
Athens Convention Center, Athens, Greece

The Importance of Cross-Cultural Knowledge

Bogdan Momir^a, Ioan Petroman^a, Elena Claudia Constantin^{b*}, Amalia Mirea^a, Diana
Marin^a
^aBanat's University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine "King Michael I of Romania" from Timisoara, Faculty of Agricultural
Management, 119 Calea Aradului, 300645, Timisoara, Romania

^bUniversity Politehnica Timisoara, Faculty of Communication Sciences, Department of Communication and Foreign Languages, 2 Petre
Ramneantu Street, 300596 Timisoara, Romania

Abstract

The article focuses on the need of cross cultural knowledge for people working and living in the contemporary EU world. After joining the EU the Romanian work force underwent a profound transformation. Being aware of the cultural differences can provide better employment opportunities. The article focusses on the advantage of working in interdisciplinary field teams to promote the local products and preserve the traditions of Banat. A well designed marketing campaign can help present not only the traditional food in Banat, but also develop and create local path networks for the iconic landscapes in order to develop sustainable tourism. The authors stress the importance of university education in changing and developing mentalities, as part of a long term plan to secure a better future and a stronger rural economy.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Academic World Education and Research Center.

Keywords: training; mass communication, Banat, traditions, traditional food, traditional food fairs, rural areas, rural tourism

1. Introduction

In the contemporary society less emphasis is put on civilization and culture, and paradoxically their role is of utmost importance. To be able to preserve the traditions of Banat, in our opinion cross disciplinary research teams should be constituted at various levels: local, regional, national as part of a long term plan to secure a better future and a stronger rural economy. The university environment should not be omitted as it has the ability to change and

* Elena Claudia Constantin Tel.: +4000 770 150 823
E-mail address: elclconst@gmail.com

develop mentalities. More than this, proper university training can help graduates find better employment opportunities.

The article presents the concept of culture and its main components, followed by the ways in which traditions of Banat reflect the multicultural ethnicity in the traditional food. The authors also suggest some ways in which the university teaching staff can help train the specialists in order to promote the traditional national values.

2. Culture and cultural specificity

When we think of culture, “a complex of tangible and intangible items comes to mind” (Wells, Burnett, Moriarty: 2003, p.92). In the first category we can rank the so called material culture, made up of music, literature, art in general. In the latter one, the classification is more difficult, as it refers to concepts, values, behaviors, mentality; all the things transmitted from generation to generation, but not genetically.

Much too often, people from diverse cultures behave differently in a given context. Culture is a prevailing mode to explain the individual or group variations, as far as behavior is concerned, or the differences between business behavior and its real significance. Culture patterns represent a framework for the understanding of the types of behavior encountered in business situations, which, at first, seem rather strange and difficult to understand. It is imperious necessary to make efforts to understand the sophisticated cultural models, especially in the current situation in which the business world becomes increasingly international and global.

Many attempts have been made along the years to define the concept of culture, in more than 160 definitions specialist tried to define it, but none of them was unanimously accepted (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952). In general, culture defines a way of life for a group of people, as each person learns a culture through a variety of experiences in his/her life. The most common mechanism, i.e.: culturalisation is an unintentional process that includes everything we learn from the environment (Herskovits, 1948). Primary socialization takes place in the family and the local community environment where we learn how to behave, first within the family frame, then with friends, later in school and in the community, and it is not something people are born with (Berger and Luckmann, 2011).

Therefore, since cultures are associated with specific geographic regions, it is to be expected that the population of a country behave differently from the population of other countries. Then, there is another type of socialization, a secondary one which is a continuous learning process, both informal and formal, which affects significantly the behavior at work. This behaviour includes the organizational motivations, reactions to the planned changes in an organization, as well as the individual's career development plan. Cultural sociology perceives culture "a set of material and spiritual values, institutions, customs, norms, traditions, as an expression of the way of living and the life quality" (Civilizatia nevoia perspective- our translation) and analyzes it, in terms of social conditioning and its social functions, as a subsystem of sociology.

In 1959, White and Dillingham, in their essay "The Concept of Culture", see culture function to the scientific context of interpretation. Culture is “a name given to a class of things which is dependent, irrespective if they are events or symbols, into a human or extra -human context. However, Edward B. Taylor's definition of culture remains the starting point for further definitions. Thus, culture is broadly defined, ethnographically, as a complex ensemble which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, laws, customs and other skills and habits acquired by an individual as a member of a society“, to which other elements are added: political organisation, material objects made by humans, language, religion and other characteristics that differentiate human societies (Zdenek, 1969); in his view, culture is a *set of learned behaviors, socially influenced*.

Culturalisation is an unintentional process that includes everything we can learn from the environment (Herskovits, 1948). People do not behave in a certain way because they are pruned by birth, but because they are taught to behave like this.

In the anthropological sense, even individuals who have no education whatsoever, or are illiterate, have a culture, i.e.: group culture which they belong to, no matter how primitive or advanced it is. By birth, a human becomes a member of a species, but it is not human until he/she assimilates the culture of the respective group; a culture synthesized and transmitted from generation to generation. Every human being is the product of a culture and it explains the differences between people which are actually differences between the cultures in which they lived. Anthropologists emphasize that we live our lives following the models and the standards transmitted by our own culture, therefore we are the product of our culture. The Romanian anthropologist Achim Miha perceives culture as:

“the lifestyle particular to a group of people, in the circumstances of a particular environment, created by man and consists of material and non-material goods transmitted from one generation to another” (2002: 92, our translation). The researcher makes the distinction between three parts, relatively autonomous: culture, living environment and the surrounding environment. He perceives culture as something particular to a group of people, which is distinctive, specific to the place where the cultural act takes place and is transmitted from generation to generation. There is a clear distinction between the material culture, which includes all the physical objects made by humans, and the techniques used to produce them and non- material or the spiritual culture, which consists of habits, norms, beliefs, values, skills, languages etc., passed from one generation to another. He identifies three main components of culture: cognitive, normative, and symbolic (Mihu: 2002, p.9, our translation). The cognitive component consists of: popular knowledge, scientific knowledge and beliefs, while the popular knowledge is shared by the members of the same group and consists of everyday experience of the people. In the latter category the following enter: explanations and interpretations of phenomena and beliefs based on superstition and ignorance made by the group members. As far as beliefs are concerned, even if they cannot be verified scientifically, they play an important part in the traditional communities. The researcher makes the distinction between a *belief in a phenomenon*, which refers to the existence of the phenomenon, and the *belief on the phenomenon*; the latter refers to the faith concerning the relationship the respective phenomenon with other phenomena.

In an entire different category, we have the scientific knowledge which is made up of an “ensemble of the explanations and interpretations which can be verified by experiments and the normative component” (Mihu: 2002, p.9, our translation). It consists of a set of rules governing the mode of action of the members of the group, of the community or of the society; they are ways of thinking, of acting and of behavior which are required to the of group members in specific situations; all of them are learned in the processes of socialization and enculturation. Even if there is no clear information regarding the institutionalization of these rules, their compliance is mandatory.

The normative component is made up of *traditional social norms, customs, laws and values*. Social norms are valid for all the members of the society and they refer to the social behavior in general. The findings of the study made by William Graham Sumner, in 1906, indicate that, in general, cultures consist of a group of concepts and not just of dispersed elements, and to belong to a culture means to behave in accordance with the norms and the conventions of that particular group. For most individuals, to conform to a cultural group is very important because to be like the others gives you security and it is a good thing, while being different is equal to a bad thing (Trenholm, 1995: 316). Norms are not easy to see in everyday life, but their violation is and it is often sanctioned by the public opinion or by the media.

It is a fact that the cultural influence of a community can only be discerned in a usual environment, be it a group of friends, a village, a region or a country. However, irrespective of the situation every individual should behave in a society, in a way that is culturally acceptable. The traditional customs are associated with intense feelings and value judgments regarding good and evil, justice and injustice. In some societies, the infringement of the norms ends up in a death sentence, as it is considered a danger to the fundamental values of the community.

Social habits do not lead to such vehement reactions because the intensity of feelings that are associated with them is relatively low. Individuals who reject the social norms, and dress or behave differently, can be regarded as eccentric, can be avoided, but they are not punished by laws. However, there are situations where the existence of different traditional customs might be triggering a social conflict, and also other cases in which a traditional social norm becomes institutionalized.

Values play an essential role in any society, because they are the basis underlying the occurrence of norms and laws and they influence their content. The values of a society also dictate the content of the spiritual rules, therefore all the societies, epochs, had their own value systems. Thus, education will be a priority in a society that values education and the norms will ensure access to education for all the people, and work will be a priority in a society that has the cult of work.

The third main component of culture is the symbolic one; considered by some as the most important one, mainly because culture is sometimes defined as “a world of symbols”. A symbol can have any physical form, may take the form of a material, an object, may even be a color, a sound, a smell, a movement of an object, a gesture, etc. , and its meaning is derived or determined by the groups that use it.

3. The rural community in Banat

As researchers and university teachers, we focused our attention on the Banat area, not only because we live here, but also because we have the “power” to influence so many people by the activity we deploy the universities of Timisoara.

- General information

The situation of Banat is rather special as it covers a vast area, 28,526 km², in three countries, i.e.: Romania, Serbia and Hungary. The so called Romanian Banat consists of three main parts: Timis, Caras-Severin, part of Arad and part of Mehedinți. As far as Timis is concerned, from an administrative and economic point of view only, there are: 89 communes and 313 villages; 37.8 % of the population lives in rural areas. A main characteristic that it is worth mentioning is the fact that the inhabitants of Banat belong to more than 16 ethnic nationalities which peacefully coexist for centuries, and are renowned for their good cooperation with neighbors.

Banat has a remarkable agricultural potential, due to the quality of the soils, climate and living conditions. The region has the highest rank of employment in West Region, being a favorable area for industry and agriculture. The rural areas are characterized by low population density, with a demographic decline and a low capacity of demographic renewal.

- Occupations and traditions of the people living in Banat

The cultural space of Banat is extremely diverse and heterogeneous, influenced by the ethnic groups who have been living together in this area bounded by a strong national and cultural specificity. The Romanian rural space is totally different from the European one, as it is “a world with unwritten stories, with people tanned, with oral traditions, with chickens, cows and sheep; a “different” world for many of the inhabitants of the Western Europe. A world with dust on the road sides [...] a world in which everybody knows everybody, a world of contradictions, where old and new blend; a poor world by contemporary standards and hard to understand by those who know it from statistics only” (Constantin, 2014, p.2012). A fervent admirer of the Romanian countryside is Prince Charles of Wales who considers it as: “It’s the last corner of Europe where you see true sustainability and complete resilience. There’s so much we can learn from it before it’s too late.” He fell so much under the spell of the place that he bought a house in one of the wooden villages, then acquired another property” (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2590673/Romanians-They-teach-thing-two-says-Prince-Charles.html#ixzz3PXYvngCg>). Many Romanian villages in the country side look like England around the year 1800, where “there are no fences; horses are a common sight on the roads pulling trailers and in the fields yoked to ploughs”

Regrettably, the Romanian and the European authorities ignore the simple and pure life of the ordinary farmers. Therefore, farmers ignore the newly imposed European laws, and, to be honest, many of them “do not really understand concepts such as: animals have to be held, at least, 8 hours per day at a 40 lux light and have to have visual contact”, etc. (Constantin: 2013, p.92). They know, but do not accept the European directive regarding the slaughter of livestock, according to which it is required to render an animal unconscious before it is slaughtered. In their views, the suggested procedures do nothing else, but deteriorate the quality of the meat and of the blood, the main elements in the food rituals. They have been disregarding the European directives and continue to raise and sacrifice their animals as they learned from their elders. Pigs are sacrificed on the day of Ignatius of Antioch (20 December) according to the tradition and this is a special event for each household. Regrettably, the European laws do not encourage animal raising, and as a consequence “sheep raising is the only branch of Romanian animal husbandry which increased these years” (Petroman et al. 2014, p.151, our translation).

- Traditional food

Romanian traditional food is not very well known around the world. However those who have tasted it once will never forget it. One of the most famous examples is Prince Charles of Wales, who does not only appreciate the Romanian food, but also the pure living style of the Romanian rural population; according to him: “Romanians?

They can teach us a thing or two” (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2590673/Romanians-They-teach-thing-two-says-Prince-Charles.html>), says Prince Charles he observed that: “Grapes, sweet from the summer sun, cluster from the vines that twine about the eaves of the farmhouses. Geese waddle out of the farmyards. Fruit swells in the orchards. Sheep are often guarded by gipsy shepherds, accompanied by ferocious dogs capable of repelling wolves[...] Everybody is making jams, syrups and cordials out of every conceivable berry, fruit and nut. It's a land overflowing with good things, where weaving and embroidery are still practiced[...] People are yearning for that sense of identity and belonging and meaning” (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2590673/Romanians-They-teach-thing-two-says-Prince-Charles.html#ixzz3PXYvngCg>).

Romanian cuisine is varied as far as starters and main courses are concerned. The association between different traditional cuisines specific to the populations cohabiting for hundreds of years in this region made the Banat cuisine be one of the most diversified cuisines in the world (Pirvulescu et al: 2009, p. 733, our translation). One can find images of the food described at Romania culinara at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JuhcA-G4LiE>

Some of the food prepared has a religious significance and is associated to different religious events, as for example:

- on Maundy Thursday - one *colac* (a king of doughnut) home-made is given as alms for the dead who come to their old homes every year on this day;
- on Maundy Thursday eggs are stained; in villages of Banat, people mainly use the outer layers of onions for this;
- for Easter - *prescura* (wafer bread) is made and taken to church.

Other types of food are regularly eaten by the families in Banat, such as:

- *ciorba*- sour soup or a broth - soured with *bors*, supplemented with cream and seasoned with tarragon;
- *bors*- is a drink made of wheat flakes fermented; has a sour or bitter taste and is added in *ciorba* to amplify the flavours;
- *soups* are cooked with home-made noodles, and with *rantas*, as well.
- *home-made noodles* are much used for snacks, meals and also for sweets.
- *iofca* - made of home-made noodles with fillings of cabbage, nuts, poppy
- *goulash*- a traditional Hungarian dish widely cooked in most kitchens of Banat, due to its multicultural character;
- *papricas*- a dish made of potatoes or noodles made of flour and eggs, boiled in water and salt;
- *sarmale* - one is called a *sarma*, In pickled cabbage leaves they put rice, chopped meat, onions, spices, wrap them and boiled them in red sauce made of tomatoes;
- *piftie* - looks like a gelatin mix; is made of parts of pig; less impressive look, but great taste.
- *Varga Beles* - which is a baked pastry pudding made of home-made noodles with sweet cheese and raisins;
- *pogacele* - made of pastry and pork-scraps- an aperitif;
- *muraturi* – a kind of pickles, made of cabbages, and all sorts of vegetables;
- *tuica* - plum brandy
- *jambon* - a kind of dry- cured ham that is usually thinly sliced and served uncooked; it is similar to Prosciutto, but in Romanians' point of view it is much better. The process is rather long; the raw material is pig legs; only salt (sometimes garlic/ paprika) is used, other preservatives are forbidden.
- *caltabos* - is a kind of sausages made from pig offal cooked and grind on the day of sacrificing pig;
- *sangerete* - similar with caltabos, but it is red because of the pig blood it contains. It is consumed fresh or smoked;
- *mamaliga* - polenta
- *ardei umpluti* - a kind of stuff peppers; bell peppers are mainly used and the composition used is similar to that used for sarmale;
- *salata de vinete* – a kind of roasted eggplant salad, made salt and oil;
- *salata de boef*- beef salad, made especially at the countryside at all the holidays, consists of chopped meat and boiled vegetables, with mayonnaise. It can be served as side dish or on its own.

Even if all these types of food are common to the inhabitants of Banat, they are unusual for the foreigners visiting this region. They take a long time to prepare and can be found only in restaurants serving Romania specific food. But not even there can be found the traditional types of cheese made only by the shepherds, such as *telemea*, *urda*, *branza*, *branza de burduf*,

- **Traditional food and drink exports projects**

The emergence of individual farms as the basic structure of agriculture, led to an increase number of animals in the private sector and to an enhanced capability to process animal and vegetable products. Considering their tradition to keep animals and their passion for agriculture we are considering a process to revitalize the traditional villages by bringing to life their traditions and their national food.

We are considering launching a rural tourism program, aimed at attracting more people to rural areas and encouraging them to stay longer when they visit, and eventually take part in international food fairs. We are studying ways to design marketing campaigns in which we can present not only the traditional food in Banat, but also to develop and create local path networks and for iconic landscapes; important factor in the development of sustainable tourism. All our actions are part of a long term plan to secure a better future and a stronger rural economy.

Considering the complexity of the cultural processes which have been developing within the Banat area, it is imperious to make efforts to make them known. We intend to design a plan how to work with local businesses of Banat to encourage and help them export the food and drink they produce. Considering the number of the people living in Banat and especially those living in the rural areas, we think that this enterprise will be profitable, both for the local development and for the Romanian and foreign tourism. We know that rural businesses are as diverse as those in urban areas, and each year thousands of people visit the national parks of Banat and the spa resorts.

In the first stage of our project we need an interdisciplinary team, i.e.: experts in promotion, trade development, in opening new markets, communication. Being aware of potential barriers, procedures have been established in order to support and train the team members. Therefore first of all, we evaluated our internal and external assets in order to be able to design a good business plan. In developing our team we considered that each member of the team is unique in knowledge, skills, experience. The same is true for the producers of traditional food, our target population.

We started our endeavour by brainstorming and by asking ourselves what the farmers think and value; we had to identify their core values. The findings were confirmed or discarded after the talk with their representatives, and we established the commonly agreed values. As the participants in our plan were of different ethnic groups we did not underestimate the degree of the community sense or ignore that one of the most important elements in human life is culture. “Civilisations are special forms of cultural organisations “. Societies are social forms enabling people to live together (Arlt, n.d.). Since we are dealing with people of all woks of life we paid much attention to the people’s attitudes, beliefs and behaviour.

We made sure that the team members are competent, imaginative, good communicators, reasonable, open minded, etc. We have to have total transparency about the individual roles of each member of the team, their rights and responsibilities. Last but not least we have to state how the roles relate to one another and how they contribute to achieve the tem goals. The guiding principles are: treating people the way they want to be treated, recognize the difference in values, respect, etc.

Our target population would be the farmers in all the villages of Banat. In trying to convince them to take part in these kinds of events, we had regard for their age, both for the producers and for potential customers. All the members of the team have clear expectations about their roles, as they are aware that underperformance is much too often caused by lack of role clarity. All the objectives were tailored to the producers’ needs. Furthermore, we intend to let nothing undermine their trust because the whole project is based on our collaboration; if people will feel demotivated, and frustrated they will stop collaboration. In our interdisciplinary team communication will have a high priority, as the so called “silence in a team” has disastrous effects upon the team cohesiveness.

The next stage of our project is to inform farmers on every local, regional and international event to convince them to present their products. As far as customers are concerned, the task will be easier with middle aged people,

who still remember the taste of the traditional products. The challenge will be to make young people interested in going to these kinds of events and make them taste traditional food.

4. Discussions and conclusions

Promoting the traditional food of Banat with the help of our students from the Banat's University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine "King Michael I of Romania" and from the University Politehnica Timisoara is the starting point in developing awareness of the people of Banat regarding the importance of cross cultural knowledge. Not only among the multi nationalities living in Banat, but also within the frame of the European Union states.

We would like to stress the importance that teachers have, as a source of developing human minds. In today's society we consider that the teaching staff has to be more involved in the societal problems. Unfortunately, the teaching staff in Romania is not motivated enough, either financially or from the status point of view. Too many people disregard the teachers' 'activity and it is high time to show them they are wrong; one way of doing it is to get involved the community life.

Companies have conducted studies that indicate the need for intercultural knowledge in all fields of life and they even suggest that in today's context, the "intercultural training modules [...] should be customized to employees' needs" (Tanase: 2013, p. 1006). The findings pointed out that "all surveyed companies identify goals and challenges as advantages of cultural mentoring", such as "harmonization of communication styles and working practices in virtual teams" whose team members come from various geographical areas, enhancing employer branding, increased work (Tanase, 2013: 1007).

In our opinion, the traditional food speaks the same language, irrespective of nationality, religion or political preferences. We should promote those traditions that are benefic to the people, adapt them to meet today's living environment. Traditions that bring misfortune to the people living today in a certain group, do not meet the purpose they once had, and the initial purpose was to protect the clan/ group members. But no one can feel offended when tasting a plate with traditional food, one which contains all the ingredients accepted by their culture. In order to live well in this globalized world we have to pay attention to the fact that there are unique cultural values and working practices and both parts have to make efforts to adapt.

We are training students for jobs in the EU, and they have to know that failure to understand or adapt to another intercultural style may result in misunderstandings, conflict or poor performance. That is why we think that by involving them in these kinds of projects they have the opportunity to meet, know, and interact with several cultures, with people of various nationalities, of various all walks of life prepare them better for real life situations. There will be a need caused by the "demographic change and the necessity for workforce diversity in the near future" [...] which will require "improving the internal and external communication" (Tanase, 2013, p. 1007).

Enhancing their intercultural awareness and understanding will not only reduce cultural misunderstandings and conflict but it will create a good working atmosphere, and teams or organisations will benefit from multiculturalism. The professional and personal development will have to meet the challenges of: "dealing with different communication styles, dealing with conflict and lack of trust, raising awareness of diversity, dealing with clash of expectations, addressing skill development, [...] identifying and separating personality aspects from cultural influence, assessing development with reference to dealing with different cultural backgrounds, enabling and delivering mentor training (Tanase, 2013, p. 1007)

In conclusion, we can say that the role of culture cannot be underestimated. All its components, i.e.: cognitive, normative and symbolic play a very important part in interpreting and understanding world phenomena. The traditional customs are associated with intense feelings and value judgments regarding good and evil, justice and injustice. Values play an essential role in any society, being the basis underlying the occurrence of norms and laws, which at their turn also dictate the content of the spiritual rules. Thus, education will be a priority in a society that values education and the norms will ensure access to education for all the people.

University education plays an important role in changing and developing mentalities, important part in the long term plan to secure a better future and a stronger rural economy.

Acknowledgements

This paper was published under the frame of European Social Fund, Human Resources Development Operational Programme 2007-2013, project no. POSDRU/159/1.5/S/132765.

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